



AAC Publications

Syao Kang (6,041m) first ascent, Chaw East (6,404m), attempt

Asia, Nepal, Janak Himal

In post-monsoon season 2012, a New Zealand Alpine Club expedition led by John Nankervis explored the rarely visited Yangma Khola region, west of Kangchenjunga. Permits had been granted for Syao Kang (also spelled Suaokang) and Chaw East. Both peaks are situated in the upper Yangma, Chaw East on the Nepal-Tibet border. There is no record of either peak having been attempted.

We accessed the region from the standard trekking route to the north side of Kangchenjunga. Branching left from the village of Lelep, a less-defined track follows the Yangma Khola to the village of Yangma (4,200m), where we arrived on October 18. This settlement of 11 families is situated on sunny, south-facing terraces above fertile river flats. From the village a reconnaissance established a site for base camp, and explored possible routes onto Syao Kang and Chaw East. On the 20th base camp was set up on a grassy yak paddock close to the summer grazing village of Syao (4,400m).

We decided to attempt Syao Kang first, as it looked to be the less problematic of the two peaks. Local knowledge indicated a possible access route starting from the foot of the Ohmi Glacier and following a small tributary valley onto the peak's eastern flanks. This valley provided comfortable campsites at 4,950 and 5,300m, with spectacular views of Kangchenjunga and Jannu from the top camp. A day was spent negotiating a route through steep walls of rock and glacial ice above camp and onto the crevassed slopes above. We only belayed one and a half pitches on the final section of exposed ridge. At 3:30 p.m. on the 25th, John Cocks, Martin Hunter, Geoffroy Lamarche, Nick Shearer, and I summited Syao Kang. Two GPS readings indicated a height of 6,041m. Syao Kang has three summits: the north is clearly the lowest, while the south summit appears to be of similar height to the central summit that we climbed.

Back at base camp, John Nankervis, still suffering from altitude sickness, decided not to join the rest of us for an attempt on the more inaccessible Chaw East. Three days were spent pushing a route onto the Phuchang Glacier, where, on the 31st, a high camp was established at 5,600m. To get there we had followed the outlet of the Phuchang stream, which enters the Yangma valley behind Syao. Steep, scrubby ground on the stream's true right was followed by several kilometers of demanding terminal moraine. Until about 40 years ago, Yangma residents had used the Phuchang as a trade route into Tibet, crossing the Phuchang La (5,700m). However, glacial recession clearly put a stop to this, as an ugly cirque with 40m rock walls now forms a serious obstacle below the col.

A short icefall also barred our intended route onto Chaw's west ridge. On November 1 we climbed two steep ice pitches through seracs. Lower-angled slopes then led onto the west ridge of Chaw at an altitude of 5,850m. We followed this ridge a short distance before deciding to abandon the attempt some 500m beneath the summit.

On November 3 most of us left base camp, though John, who had not sufficiently recovered from altitude sickness, was evacuated by helicopter the following day. The remaining members crossed the Marsen La and Nango La into the Ghunsa Khola, where we regained the Kangchenjunga trail.

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Images



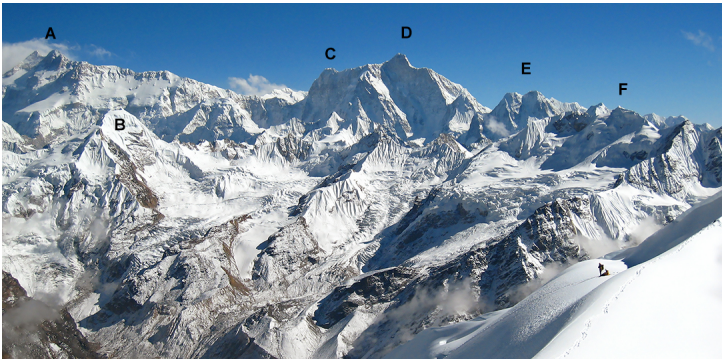
The village of Yangma with Sayo Kang directly above. The peak was climbed via a route that went up behind the long rock ridge that falls to the right



On the summit ridge of Syao Kang with the Phuchang Valley behind



Chaw East from the Phuchang Glacier to the south. The New Zealand attempt climbed through the small icefall on the left, then along the skyline ridge to a highpoint just short of the middle ice cliff



High on the east side of Sayo Kang, with a wonderful panorama toward (A) Kangchenjunga (8,586m), (B) Danga (ca 6,350m), (C) Jannu East (7,468m), (D) Jannu (7,711m), (E) Sobithongie (6,652m), and (F) Nupchu II (6,044m). Editor's note: After this photo was published in AAJ 2014, new information about the history and naming of Nupchu surfaced. Nupchu II is the proposed new name for "F." See <http://publications.americanalpineclub.org/articles/13201212680>.

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